



City of Newburgh

Office of the City Manager

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Courthouse Burial Ground Working Group

FROM: Ann Kuzmik, Administrative Assistant to the City Manager

RE: Courthouse Burial Ground;
Meeting of April 2, 2008- Summary of Comments

DATE: April 8, 2008

Attendees:

City Manager Jean-Ann McGrane
Geoffrey Chanin, Corporation Counsel
Yaniyah Pearson, Director of Human Services
Betsy McKean, Records Manager
Ann Kuzmik, Administrative Assistant
Fr. Bill Scafidi, Church of St. Mary
Mayor Nick Valentine
Chuck Stewart, Hudson Valley Press
Ed McCarthy, Hudson Valley Press
Richard Peterson, Varick Homes
Mary McTamaney, City Historian
Otis A Dees, A.M.E. Zion Church
Cynthia Fountain
Frederica Warner
Councilwoman Marge Bell
Councilwoman Mary Ann Dickinson
Councilwoman Regina Angelo

MISSION:

The mission of this group is closely linked with that of other groups who have sought to bring dignity and honor to the final resting places of forgotten African Americans, by creating memorials around the country, including the African Burial Ground National

Monument in New York City, the scene of the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921, and the African-American cemetery in Montgomery, NY.

BACKGROUND:

During recent excavations at the future courthouse site, once the location of an African American burial ground, three sets of human remains were found, believed to be a man, a woman, and a child of indeterminate gender. The current status of the project is as follows: although exterior work has been halted temporarily, interior work is continuing. The group feels that work should not “rush forward” on this site until appropriate research has been done. A total work stoppage would be extremely costly; therefore, an archeologist will be selected to be on site during further excavation and to determine what further measures if any are necessary. It is expected that the City Council will be briefed on the proposed hiring of an archeologist at their second work session in April, scheduled for April 24.

The Medical Examiner has custody of the remains found to date, and will remain custodian until the group is ready to implement a plan for their re-interment. It is anticipated, but has not yet been determined that the Medical Examiner will be custodian of any remains that may be found.

SUMMARY:

The apparent consensus of the group at the 3/26/08 meeting was not to re-inter any found remains elsewhere, however, further discussion at the 4/2/08 meeting indicated that the group has not yet reached a decision. According to Doug Mackey of the New York State Office of Parks and Historical Preservation, the remains can stay where they are; and, according to Corporation Counsel, there is no legal requirement to re-inter them elsewhere.

Certain steps can be taken to try to identify the names of people who were buried at the Burial Ground. According to City Historian Mary McTamaney, few names appear in pre-Civil War era records. Only five names of persons who were buried there can be confirmed, noted in 1850-1860 Census records and applications to the Alms House. Also, remains from the Burial Ground have been removed and relocated on four separate occasions spanning several decades.

Many if not all of those interred were believed to be freed men and women. Their names may be found in other records of the time. Other cemeteries in the City have long been racially integrated. We can try to trace the deeds showing ownership of the property, but they only go back so far and are incomplete. The known history of the site and of the community should be incorporated into its commemoration.

The Federal Government and New York City could both perhaps much more afford a work stoppage and exhaustive research on the lower Manhattan site than Newburgh can on this project. However, the City is committed to finding out to the best of its ability, who has been and may still be interred there, using technical assistance and guidance

from an on-site archeologist, advice from the State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO), as well as research into all available records and gathering information from the community.

It is important to remember there will be areas beneath the Broadway School that will not be excavated, and the contents of which will never be known. In a historic and spiritual sense, names lost to time and the anonymity of souls is a meaningful part of the African-American experience. Other commemorations have taken this approach as well.

The history of the community and how the site came to be makes a strong argument against further exhumations for future re-interment elsewhere. The anonymity of the souls interred there hallow this ground. There will always be remains of unknown persons in this ground. Some may be Native American, and others of any race. The history and presence of this site is a gift worth preserving and can be a healing force.

This historic site can be officially recognized and designated as such by the State of New York by meeting state criteria and submitting the appropriate application. This will require thorough research, which will include community outreach. The community can be strengthened through this recognition and effort to recall and commemorate its heritage. Research should be geared to identifying as many names as possible.

Perhaps state or federal funding might be available for the work of commemorating this site and its history. Professional researchers and educators should be asked for their opinions as to how much research on such a site might be appropriate, and what such research might be expected to yield. The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) and SHPO could also give information and advice.

Regardless of which course is chosen, the group identified the following priorities:

- The burial ground site at the future courthouse should be commemorated as soon as possible, and eventually have a permanent historical marker
- Memorials should be created inside as well as outside the courthouse building
- An initial spiritual commemoration of this site is of great importance, and should take place as soon as possible. This can be performed when work on the Courthouse is suspended, such as on weekends. Interfaith groups in the City can also be invited to participate, and the ceremonies should be as inclusive as possible.
- Any commemoration and memorial or spiritual observance at this site should take into consideration the likelihood that Native Americans and other people of color were interred there, and incorporate the religious traditions and ceremonies of these other cultures; as well as the diversity of faiths represented which is present in the community today.

- Because of the strong possibility of interments of Native Americans and other persons of color, further examination of remains to determine their ethnicity should be considered
- A restrictive covenant should be enacted to exclude further disturbance of the remains by future development and the burial ground on site should be permanently recognized like any other cemetery
- The burial sites at Woodlawn Cemetery and the Alms House Cemetery on Snake Hill should also be memorialized in some way.
- Efforts including the possible use of ground penetrating radar should be made to identify how many other grave sites remain in the former burial ground,
- Prior to determining the final course of action, research should be done to identify who was buried at the site and the background of the site
- Community outreach and publicity should begin as soon as possible to get the word out about what the committee is doing

In order to work toward these common priorities, the group elected to form subcommittees. They include:

- Site Documentation Research (Mary McTamane, Otis C. Dees,)
- Research of the Remains- “What Can We Learn?” (Cynthia Fountain)
- Spiritual Healing (Pam Krizek, Denise Ribble, Fr. Bill Scafidi)
- Commemoration (Pamela Krizek, Ed McCarthy, Chuck Stewart, Dick Peterson, Marge Bell, Kendall Henry, Yanyah Pearson)

The research committees will have two primary areas of concern:

- Documentary research – to look into census, land, church, and all other historical records to gather as much information as possible; as well any information on the Burial Ground and the relocation of remains to the Alms House and Woodlawn Cemeteries.
- Forensic research/scientific research- to explore scientific and technological methods to examine the remains and other related materials to gain further information and estimate what further knowledge may be discoverable.

The Commemoration/Spiritual Committee will:

- Study and devise the appropriate method of commemorating the Burial Ground site, the souls of those who have and who still repose there, and the other burial sites linked to this project.
- The committee will work on appropriate services, spiritual and healing ceremonies, appropriate forms of commemoration, including monument and site design incorporating historical information about the site and the community.

An overall project committee to coordinate the work of the committees with activities related to the Courthouse project may also be formed. Additional data- gathering will advise the group on what additional tasks can and should be undertaken.

Next Meeting: The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, April 23 at 5 p.m. in the Newburgh Heritage Center (former Grand Street Courthouse) at 123 Grand Street. The time, date, and place will be confirmed shortly.